

# “A Question of Pigment?” The Representation of Mexicans in the Depression Art of Dorothea Lange

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Dorothea Lange was a US documentary photographer who earned national recognition during the Depression era. Her picture of Florence Thompson and her children known as *Migrant Mother* (1936) has become an iconic depiction of the age, of the distressed reality of a sacred relationship that represented not only the devastating present of the farm workers during the 1930s but also the threat of a hopeless future for these people—and the whole nation. As the country slowly emerged out of the Depression, it had to face another test: World War II. Lange, by then a well-known artist, gave up her Guggenheim fellowship to accept an assignment in 1942 to document the internment of the Japanese-American population at various detention camps throughout the country. Nevertheless, again, she found herself portraying the weak and the marginalized, the hopeless and the desperate in her homeland, whose suffering was the consequence of something beyond their responsibility or control. After the war, she also spent time visiting less developed countries in Asia, Africa, and South America, as well as depicting faces and scenes from the everyday life of the locals.

## Lange and Documentary Photography

Lange, however, did not start as a documentary photographer. With a course in photography from Columbia under her belt, she left New York to see and photograph the world. After settling, in 1918, in San Francisco, she soon emerged as a solicited portrait photographer among the “San Francisco merchant princes,” as she referred to them (Acker 47). Lange distinguished herself through her unique approach to portrait making: she would meet her clients several times before taking their photographs, talking to them, and getting to know them. When she felt they were comfortable in her company, she would start photographing them in unstaged poses, depicting their natural facial expressions with a particular focus on the eyes. The images she created were “romantic, flattering, individualizing, and slightly unconventional,” as Linda Gordon described them (“Agricultural Sociologist” 704): they earned her a reputation that guaranteed her a steady income and entry into the more affluent and bohemian circles of the city.

In the early 1930s, however, she could not help noticing the burgeoning poverty in her neighborhood, the growing number of unemployed and homeless people in the streets, standing in long breadlines. She soon turned her camera lens on these

economic and social outcasts, the people in desperate need. Her natural curiosity and sympathy towards them intersected with her artistic talent and experience as a professional portraitist, resulting in a series of sophisticated images in which the people of the streets were depicted through the objective eye of the camera, but with the empathy and sensitivity of the vision behind it, thus producing portraits of unfortunate individuals with a powerful sense of human dignity.

These images were displayed in her first individual show held in 1934 in Oakland, bringing her instant success: “Viewers, unaccustomed to seeing such direct, blunt images of social protests, were amazed” (Acker 70). One of the visitors deeply touched by her photographs was Paul S. Taylor, a professor of economics at the University of California, Berkeley, who was known as a leading researcher of rural poverty and exploitation at the time. He felt that Lange’s evocative images would complement his research in multiple ways, so he asked her to join him in his project for the California State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA), an offer she readily accepted. Following one year of collaborative efforts, Lange was widely recognized for her exceptional images and was employed by the Resettlement Administration (RA), a federal agency later called the Farm Security Administration (FSA). This New Deal agency hired several other young photographers, such as Arthur Rothstein, Walker Evans, Esther Bubley, Ben Shahn and Jack Delano, and expected them to use their cameras “to document rural living conditions to get both an informational base for the Administration to work from and to educate the country about the impoverished conditions of these agrarian citizens in a way that simultaneously promoted the agency and its programs” (Gordon, “Dorothea Lange” 17). These artists conveyed the plight of the sharecroppers and migrant farm laborers concurrently as well as became parts of the FSA propaganda machinery, making it the most effective agency of the New Deal by producing approximately 270,000 photographs in nine years (Acker 81).

Lange worked for the FSA from 1935 to 1939, capturing the visual landscape not only of California but of most Southern states. She would drive around the areas tirelessly and stop each time something unusual caught her eye: she focused her camera lens on the landscape and the people who inhabited it, engaged in conversation with them if possible, always taking brief field notes and then shooting pictures, one after the other. On these trips, she was often accompanied by her then-husband, Paul Taylor. His progressivism and devotion to the economic study of the underprivileged continued to be a leitmotif throughout his life, which undoubtedly strengthened the inner drive with which Lange was committed to engaging in the same project through her artistic tool: the camera.

### **Mexican Migrant Workers in the South**

“The Great Depression had disrupted the lives of people across the nation, but American farmers were particularly devastated” (Acker 14). Many of them were forced to leave their farms behind as they could no longer support their families. Prices for livestock and crops, including corn and wheat, dropped significantly; farmers had

no money to invest in new machinery, and fierce dust storms sweeping the Midwest and Southwest forced many families to abandon their homes (Mintz). Most of these displaced American farmers migrated to California, where they hoped to be hired as seasonal workers in agriculture, given that fruit and vegetables continued to be grown there in abundance.

The general climate of stress was particularly taxing for agricultural laborers of color, especially for people of Mexican origin, whom the American migrant farmers found in the fields of California. The Hispanic and Mexican presence in the region had a long history. Formerly a part of New Spain and then Mexico, the territory of California was annexed to the US as a consequence of the Mexican-American War of 1846–48 and achieved statehood status in 1850. As a result of the intensive economic development after the Civil War and the reconstruction period, “an extensive system of labor recruitment developed in the early 1880s, whereby contractors or *enganchadores* traveled into Mexico to find and hire Mexican workers” (Young 32). The demand for Mexican labor increased with the onset of World War I, due to which the US government launched a Guest Worker program in May 1917, with the specific purpose of inviting Mexican laborers to work in agriculture (Goggans 65). The most favored target area among the Mexicans was Southern California, but through the coming years, they also migrated to other farming areas in the Southwest. Their number continued to grow in the 1920s as they maintained their exempt status under the immigration restriction acts passed in the early 1920s (Young 33).

When Taylor launched his research on the conditions experienced by Mexican laborers, he found them working not only in the Californian fields but also in major industrial centers in the Midwest as well as on the East Coast. The US open-door policy was advantageous for Mexicans, in particular during the Cristero War of 1926–29, when thousands either felt the need to flee their homes in Mexico or were deported by force for their faith or political conviction (Young 42–43). By 1930, the number of inhabitants of Mexican origin in the US was close to 1.5 million, half of whom had been born in the US (Carrigan and Webb 432). The following numbers speak for themselves: US population born in Mexico 641,462; Mexican-American population born in the US 781,071; Total US population of Mexican descent 1,422,533.

Mexicans were favored in the American labor market for numerous reasons. Taylor found that they were considered to be highly agreeable, willing to do any job when asked, and “endured heat well” (14), so were hired not only in agriculture but also in mining and the heavy industry. Married men were found to be particularly reliable as they had a strong sense of responsibility towards their families. They were keen on keeping their jobs and thus a steady flow of income. Jan Goggans observed that many Mexican migrants arrived with their families during this period and settled down in Mexican neighborhoods where they maintained their language, religion, and culture, forming enclaves within mainstream society (66). Workers were sufficiently flexible to move around with their families, depending on labor shortages or even to return to Mexico if no job was available. As a result, they developed no deep attachment to any specific American communities or locations and, often, being on the move, they did not organize themselves into societies or unions either, thus presenting neither a threat to employers nor a burden on local governments. Therefore, as Daniel J.

Tichenor concluded, “Mexican guest workers were by definition temporary, powerless, and easily expelled” (170).

Even though Mexican labor had always been in demand in both rural and urban areas, signs of racial animosity towards them could be observed from the onset of American rule. Richard Delgado, along with William Carrigan and Clive Webb, investigated the lynching practices of white supremacists in the US and found that after African-Americans, Mexicans were the most frequent target of these violent attacks. As Delgado pointed out, the lynching rate in both groups was similar, but they appeared in different geographical locations (300). Both sources found that “at least 597 Mexicans” were lynched between 1848 and 1928 (Carrigan and Webb 413), most commonly in the states of Texas (282 cases), California (188 cases), Arizona (59 cases) and New Mexico (49 cases), territories where Mexicans represented the most significant ethnic minority. Mexicans were targeted for a variety of reasons, including speaking Spanish or acting “too Mexican” (Delgado 299), which illustrates how they represented the racial—and thus also cultural, social, and economic—Other to white supremacist Americans (Carrigan and Webb 418). Mexicans were also viewed as inferior and, by definition, undesirable in the country.

Demand for the Mexican presence in the American labor market in the 1920s was also seen increasingly through the lens of unveiled racism and classism, as revealed in many speeches and statements of the age. Tichenor, for example, quoted a representative for the Great Western Sugar Company of Colorado stating before the House Immigration Committee that their company

[did] not want to see the condition arise again when white men who are reared and educated in our schools have got to bend their backs and skin their fingers to pull those little beets. . . . You have got to give us a class of labor that will do this back-breaking work, and we have the brains and ability to supervise and handle the business part of it. There is no danger of that class of labor taking over the supervising work. (171)

This attitude changed rapidly as the Depression set in, and the migration of the Mexican laborers continued: “Between 1931 and 1939 the states of the west coast received . . . over 685,000 Mexicans” (Theobald and Donato 30).

It is argued that already “before the stock market crash, there had been intense pressure from the American Federation of Labor and municipal governments to reduce the number of Mexican immigrants” (Mintz) who continued to flood into the US, in particular after the Cristero War had broken out. Goggans found that in certain parts of California in the 1920s, such as in the Imperial Valley, the segregation of the Mexicans paralleled the color line legislation in the South (67). Mexicans had emerged as the racialized Other in the fields of California, where the historical memory of the native-born—that is, white-born—Americans failed to remember the times when Hispanic Mexico ruled California, let alone when the true Natives were in full possession of the land. Thus, the Mexicans—migrants as well as US-born American citizens of Mexican descent—became the natural scapegoats after the Crash of 1929. Various laws were passed on the local, state and federal levels, (1) to deprive

them of multiple rights and opportunities, therefore making life difficult for them in the US and eventually encouraging their return to Mexico; and (2) to lay the legal groundwork for their mass deportation. This latter was ultimately, as George Clemens from the LA Chamber of Commerce openly admitted, “a question of pigment, not of citizenship or right” (qtd. in Smith 172).

Americans believed that the above efforts would decrease potential relief claims and the resultant social expenditures as well as increase available jobs for native-born Americans (Mintz). “American jobs for real Americans” became a popular slogan at the time, entirely backed by the Hoover administration (Smith 172) and triggering further local initiatives aimed at the removal of the Mexican population. Their deportation intensified when William N. Doak was appointed Secretary of Labor in 1930, as he fully supported the Bureau of Immigration in their efforts to launch “intensive raids to identify aliens liable for deportation,” leading to the relocation of 82,400 Mexican migrants by the federal government alone (Mintz). The exact number of *repatriados* forced to leave the US during the period is unknown; the most widely accepted estimates place it around 500,000 (Gratton and Merchant 959).

### Lange and Her Depiction of Mexicans

It was in this general climate that Lange started taking pictures of agricultural migrants for the FSA, initially in the Imperial Valley in California. A year later, she was assigned to travel to areas in the deep South. While working there, she once inquired whom she should photograph, and Roy Stryker, her boss and head of the Information Division at the FSA, responded: “take pictures of both black and white but place the emphasis on the white tenants since we know that these will receive much wider use” (Acker 97). This answer encapsulates the overall atmosphere of the age as far as viewers were more sensitive and thus responsive to the sight of white suffering than to human suffering in general; such a representation was, therefore, more appropriate for FSA propaganda. It suggests veiled racist sentiments that probably prevailed as much among policymakers within the agency as within the American public at large. Lange, in her subtle ways, responded to this with pictures such as *Children at Hill House, Mississippi* (1936), in which the burdens, as well as the fruits of life, are shared by both races; the tired feet and deformed shoes of a female laborer in *Feet of Negro cotton hoer near Clarksdale, Mississippi* (1937); and *Plantation overseer* (1936), which captures the racist nature of social hierarchy, particularly in the South.

Lange identified with suffering regardless of its shade, origin, age, gender, or religion. She knew the pain of being an outcast and on the margins far too intimately: she was only seven when she was afflicted with polio, which left her with a limp for the rest of her life, marking her as different from all the other children around her; and she was twelve when her father abandoned the family, leaving her with feelings of uncertainty, loneliness, and rejection. Lange’s compassion for the underprivileged was accompanied by the sense of trust and respect, with which she always approached them as well as by a powerful belief in their honesty before her camera, which she considered to be at the heart of an authentic portrait. As she once said, “No subject

can hold for a long time, anything that is false for them. It can't be done. You can try, but it's ghastly. You have to wait until certain decisions are made: first by the subject—what he's going to give to the camera, and then by the photographer—what he's going to choose to take" (Meltzer 49).

And Lange was willing to take everyone in: she was very "inclusive" and "democratic" (Gordon, "Visual Democracy"), an artist who was able to portray "her subjects as worthier than their conditions" (Gordon, "Dorothea Lange" xiv), whatever those may be. She felt a moral obligation to help all these people with her photographs. Thus, she supported a nationalist agenda through the FSA that "aimed to restore prosperity and prevent further depressions, to alleviate poverty and reduce inequality" (Gordon, "Dorothea Lange" xiv). Her approach, however, was strictly territorial—it included everyone in despair within the American borders—and thus indifferent to both color and citizenship. Many of her photographs reflect the suffering in which all agricultural laborers and migrants shared, regardless of their background: a Mexican family with tire trouble, a Japanese mother with her child, or an African-American day laborer. In the fashion of the "contemporary social-science technique" (Curtis 4), she always provided captions for her photographs, which were more like photojournalistic field notes describing the circumstances in which the pictures were taken: the people in them and their conditions as well as relevant quotations from them. These captions add meaning and context to her images, especially when the visual field includes only the sitter, such as in the image of a tired-looking Mexican worker entitled *Imperial Valley, California. Old Mexican laborer* (1935), whom she quoted as saying: "I have worked all my life and all I have now is my broken body."

Most of Lange's pictures focus on Mexican labor in the fields. She took a series of images in Imperial Valley, which lies in the southern tip of California. The end of the valley is bordering Mexico, the country that provided the most considerable day labor force for the region, which amounted to ten thousand at any one time. Weather conditions allowed for various crops to grow all year round: from lettuce in the winter through peas and cantaloupe in the summer, followed by onions and watermelon in late summer and early fall. Some of Lange's images taken in the Valley, such as *Mexican cantaloupe pickers at 5:00 a.m.* (1938), convey the integration, almost a kind of dissolution of the Mexican farmworkers in the field, where race or citizenship has no place. Lange's caption for this picture continues as follows: "Gang labor. Harvests on contract by the crate. On these large ranches immediately adjacent to the border, Mexican pickers cross daily into the United States to work. Imperial Valley has developed large-scale farming and migratory labor in the most extreme form." For the contractors, the crates in the foreground become the sole signifiers of the Mexican laborers, whose presence is only noticed in terms of the number of crates they fill with cantaloupes by the end of the day. Once their crates are filled, they disappear from the farmland as well as from the US, only to return the next dawn, if needed. Their existence is measured solely in terms of their economic contribution to the agricultural profit of the Valley, which exposes both their potential exploitation and vulnerable position.

The specific mistreatment of some Mexican day laborers in the Valley can be detected in another image of a migrant laborer named *Ernesto* (1933). Interestingly, he is explicitly identified by name even if he is not identified in the image: we

presume he is the worker bending over in the foreground of the picture, the closest to us, but we do not see him as an individual, his face, height, body structure, and other identifiers being unclear to us. He seems to take no notice of the camera and continues working; we only see his hunched back and the contour of his face. Lange explains: “His family . . . was sent back to Mexico. He is hoping that he doesn’t get sent also, so he has to work very hard to keep his job.” Exploitation through implanted fear: an indecent condition that Mexicans in particular faced on the farmlands during the depression.

Another image, however, by the title “*Pulling*”, *Farm Worker* (1935), is a unique portrayal that adds an exceptional dimension to how this Mexican laborer was dealing with his unfortunate position. We recognize a middle-aged Mexican worker who is presented here with a broad smile, gazing straight down at the camera. His rounded face is accentuated by the round brim of his hat, which not only frames the happy face but is also reminiscent of a halo. At the same time, the stress of daily existence in the world around him is represented through powerful sets of oppositions: between the kind, smiling face and the rest of his body, covered by old, worn clothes; between his proud, upright position, large onions in both hands, and that of his co-workers busy at work, bending over, diligently yanking out the onions and spreading them on the ground to dry, who are almost invisible in the agricultural landscape opening up in the background into which they have become incorporated. Meanwhile, he takes joy in being recognized by Lange as someone worth being photographed: this acknowledgment seems to allow him to forget about his hardships, lifting him out of his natural milieu in the sea of stooped over Mexican laborers—at least for a short while.

Lange also reported on child labor, which was quite common among Mexican laborers in the US, such as in the picture with the caption *It was a warm day* (1935). This image shows a Mexican migrant worker with his little boy harvesting carrots together. The captions tell us about the tragedy of the death of his wife, resulting in father and son taking the migrant route together and supporting each other in every way. Children often appear in the fields in Lange’s images not only because they were expected to work but also because they, in particular, faced powerful anti-Mexican sentiments. Already in the 1920s, 80% of Mexican-American children in California attended separate schools or classes and faced various forms of institutional segregation. It was part of a broader Mexicanophobia, resulting in the proposal of the Bliss Bill by the California legislature, which officially claimed that Mexicans are, in fact, Indians (Theobald and Donato 30–32). Eventually, Mexican migrant children were not allowed to attend local public schools in some areas in California at all, and it was not until 1938 that the first schools were set up by the federal government for migrant children living in camps—regardless of their background.

The collection of Lange’s images depicting the Mexican presence in the American humanscape reveals her particular interest not only in their working conditions and experiences but also in other areas of their lives, such as their private realm. Lange explored their realities in urban centers, such as Los Angeles, where Mexican neighborhoods evolved early on. She depicted Mexican homes and their milieu in images such as *Mexican quarter of Los Angeles* (1936) and subverted the stereotypical

interpretation of Mexicans as being dirty, disordered, and careless about themselves as well as their environment. Their urban landscape reflects simplicity and modesty and a certain level of poverty, but it is neither messy nor uncared for. Examples of temporary homes built by Mexican migrants, along with the families who live in them, are shown in her image described as *This is the Garcia, and Hidalgo family* (1933). These structures are more like shelters, but still in a fenced-off area which is kept clutter-free and made as comfortable for human habitation as possible given the conditions.

Perhaps Lange's words more than her images attest to the sense of belonging that the Mexican migrant workers she portrayed in California embraced at the time. In the image with the caption *Imperial Valley, California* (1935) a gray-haired elderly man of Mexican descent with a body worn out by years of manual labor sums up his life to Lange, who wrote: "He tells his story: he helped drive the French out of Mexico, fought against Maximilian, and he has, by serving the crops for many years, help build up Imperial Valley." Here Lange gives voice to the subaltern, who has been cheated by history: as far as the migrant worker is concerned, he contributed to the success of both Mexico and California—the latter of which seems to fail to recognize his efforts and excludes him from the human landscape. However, the fact of the matter is that he should and indeed does, belong to the US as much as to Mexico.

Lange comments explicitly on the issue of Mexican identity in the context of American repatriation programs as well, which deprived numerous American citizens of Mexican origin to stay in the country they considered their home. Lange's picture of the "modern Mexican Madonna and child" identified by the name *Mexican mother in California* (1935) captures a mother holding her half-naked son on her lap, seated in front of a tree, the shade of which protects them from the intense sun. She explained the dilemma of many Mexicans to Lange, who yet again put down the words of her subject in the caption: "Sometimes I tell my children that I would like to go to Mexico, but they tell me 'We don't want to go, we belong here.'" Just like the tree that protects them from the sun, the children are also rooted in the American soil, which is their true homeland. Lange commented on the legal status of Mexican children in the captions for some other images, such as *This is the Garcia, and Hidalgo family* (1933), where she noted that the children in both families were US citizens.

Lange also captured moments of repatriation, such as in her image. *We have three Mexican American boys* (1932). The caption underneath reads: "We have three Mexican American boys packed up on a car, ready to be relocated back across the border to Mexico, with their mother and father. . . . Oldest brother Juan Carlos holds the book. The one source of entertainment for the three brothers, while on the road." These children are forced to leave the place they have known as home simply because of their background. They are probably not fully aware of what is happening, as the depiction of these children is not much different from other portrayals of American children on the road, similarly leaving behind the place they had called home. The real context and difference, however, between them and the Mexican-American children are provided by the caption.



## Conclusion

Lange once said that throughout her life, she was “compelled to photograph as a direct response to what was around [her]” (3). I believe that the images discussed above attest to Lange’s color-blind sympathy with everyone touched by the “social erosion” (Lange 4) of the Depression in the agricultural fields of the US. While she agreed to work for the FSA to promote its aim to initiate programs to improve the condition of rural migrants, she was also determined to remain faithful to what I consider her sense of honesty, decency, humanity, and democracy. Through her compassion, she was able to “look into everything, not only what it looks like but what it feels like” (Lange 3) and thus notice and reflect upon the world of her subjects with sophistication.

As a result, she managed to divulge personal realities beyond the surface of pigmentation, even if this meant that she did not fully comply with the expectations of the FSA. Lange’s art portrayed the human condition of migranhood, homelessness, unemployment, poverty, hunger, deprivation, despair, loneliness, and bleakness she had encountered in the American landscape as universal and ubiquitous, a condition that causes immense sadness, pain and desolation in the human soul, irrespective of one’s racial background. She presented men worrying about their families, women concerned about their children’s future, and individual bodily pain from labor in the fields, be the subjects White, Mexican, or African American.

Through these portrayals, Lange was thus able to challenge the racist and exclusivist implications of contemporary discourses and actions, silently subverting contemporary stereotypes and populist slogans as well. In subtle ways, she managed to present a reality more complex and faithful than that in which contemporary practices of labeling had been grounded. Lange did so not only through her visual work but also through the verbal power of her captions. She believed that the “good photograph is not the object. The consequences of the photograph are the object” (Lange 5), whatever those may be. I find that her art, with all its consequences, proves meaningful in compelling ways for us today.

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## Images and Captions (in the order of appearance in the essay)

*Migrant mother* (1936)

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998021539/PP/>

*Children at Hill House, Mississippi* (1936)

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998021724/PP/>

*Feet of Negro cottonhoer near Clarksdale, Mississippi* (1937)

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa2000001331/PP/>

*Plantation overseer* (1936)

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998021718/PP/>

*Migrants, family of Mexicans, on road with their trouble* (1936)

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998018478/PP/>

*Japanese mother and daughter* (1937)

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa2000000809/PP/>

*Negro fieldworker* (1935)

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998018188/PP/>

*Imperial Valley, California. Old Mexican Laborer* (1935)

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998018176/PP/>

*Mexican cantaloupe pickers at 5:00 a.m.* (1938)

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa2000001764/PP/>

*Ernesto* (1933)

[https://mexicanamericandepression.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/clip\\_image002.jpg](https://mexicanamericandepression.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/clip_image002.jpg)

*“Pulling”, Farm Worker* (1935)

<http://www.mocp.org/detail.php?type=related&kv=864&t=objects>

*It was a warm day* (1935)

[https://mexicanamericandepression.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/clip\\_image0021.jpg](https://mexicanamericandepression.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/clip_image0021.jpg)

*Mexican quarter of Los Angeles* (1936)

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998018278/PP/>

*This is the Garcia, and Hidalgo family* (1933)

[https://mexicanamericandepression.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/clip\\_image0022.jpg](https://mexicanamericandepression.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/clip_image0022.jpg)

*Imperial Valley, California. Mexican (1935)*

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998017772/PP/>

*Mexican mother in California (1935)*

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998017774/PP/>

*We have three Mexican American boys (1932)*

[https://mexicanamericandepression.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/clip\\_image0023.jpg](https://mexicanamericandepression.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/clip_image0023.jpg)